

Dr. T. S. Rukmani
Chair, Steering Committee for Chair in Hindu Studies

INAUGURAL ADDRESS

BY

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WELCOME ADDRESS

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Chair, Steering Committee for Chair in Hindu Studies

Mr. Rector, Dr. Robinson, Dr. Rukmani, Mrs. Sivaraman, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Indo-Canadian community, it gives me great pleasure to introduce the printed edition of the inaugural address by Dr. T. S. Rukmani, who has recently taken up the position of Chair in Hindu Studies. I would like to take this opportunity to say a few words giving the historical background regarding the creation of this Chair. It is the first of its kind, at least in North America, and the first endowed Chair in any field at Concordia. It was some time in 1984 that a group of Indo-Canadians felt that there was a great need to create opportunities for interested students in Quebec to undertake a complete program in Hindu Studies, and this group asked me to explore the possibility of establishing such a Chair at Concordia University, if sufficient funds could be raised by the Indo-Canadian community. Within sixty days, through the efforts of a number of interested members of the Concordia University community, the necessary approval by the University was obtained. Our community owes special thanks to the then Rector, Dr. John O'Brien, for his tremendous support for this project.

The campaign to raise funds was officially launched with myself as the Chair of the Steering Committee on May 25, 1985 with a benefit dance performance, at which function an amount of over \$28,000 was raised.

Even though such a large amount was raised at this function, I used to wonder many times thereafter whether the project was ever going to be completed. However, it was due to the tremendous dedication and hard work of many individuals, particularly those on the Steering Committee, as well as through the generosity of many contributors, that we were able to raise over \$500,000 within a short period of four years. I should point out that even though the major part of the contribution came from the Indo-Canadian Hindu community, considerable sums also came from other faith communities including the Judaic, Islamic and Christian communities in Montreal and elsewhere. I would like to take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to all the contributors and the volunteers who worked so tirelessly to make this project a reality. We were also able to convince the federal Dept. of Multiculturalism that it was a project worth supporting under the "Chair Programs" of the Ministry, who gave a grant of \$400,000 for this project. In this connection, I would like to once again thank Hon. Jerry Wiener, who was the federal Minister of Multiculturalism at the time.

We were indeed very fortunate that an internationally known scholar of the calibre of Dr. Krishna Sivaraman accepted to come to Concordia to take up this endowed Chair in Hindu Studies. I very vividly remember not only his first seminar, where he literally stole our hearts and minds, but also his inaugural address entitled "Wither Hindu Studies", given in this very auditorium on November 3, 1989. Even though Dr. Sivaraman was an eminent scholar in the field of Hindu Studies with Saiva Philosophy as his specialty, he was a very unassuming, kind individual, very human, simple and very likable. However, we were very unfortunate in that Dr. Sivaraman passed away in November 91, hardly two years after he came to Concordia. But in that short period he set the tone for what "Hindu Studies" ought to be.

It has taken more than three years to find a suitable replacement for Dr. Sivaraman, but it has been a worthwhile wait. Concordia University, nay, the whole Quebec community is indeed very fortunate that an eminent scholar of the calibre of Dr. Rukmani has agreed to take up the position of Chair in Hindu Studies.

Already in her short stay in Montreal, in addition to giving her courses at Concordia, she has reached out to the Hindu community of Montreal by giving a couple of lectures at one of the local temples. She is also planning a conference on the topic of "Hindu Diaspora". Further, she has scheduled evening lectures for those interested in the subject of the Upanishads from September 96. In this context, I would like to offer my personal services in assisting her in the teaching of the Upanishads or the Geetha. On behalf of all of us present here, I would like to extend her a very warm welcome, not only to Concordia but also to the Montreal community.

I would like to close my remarks with three of the verses from what is known as "Shiva Sankalpa Hridayam", and which is contained in the Yajur Veda. I have purposely chosen these verses since I feel that it not only fits the theme of today's talk, but also in view of the violence we experience around us, whether it be in Vernon, B.C., or as it happened twice here in Montreal over the last decade, or anywhere else. The violence need not only be in action, but could even be in words or public statements that we make, particularly if we are in responsible positions, statements that we make about others without accurately checking the truthfulness or the validity of such statements.

"That which sleeps not, while I sleep
That which transcends and sweeps the barriers of Time, Space and Being
And That which animates the living organisms and their sense organs to function properly
-- May that mind of mine entertain auspicious thoughts only".

"Urged whereby the wise and the learned,
People of integrity and friendly disposition take the initiative
-- In a spirit of love and sacrifice --
To think right and act accordingly --
May that mind of mine cherish sublime aspirations only".

"That which is absolute and not merely relative,
That which, when brought under control and humanized,
Helps one to tread the right path
-- May that mind of mine reflect, ponder and deliberate only
What are essentially Right and True".

Thank you very much.

April 1996

LET US TALK ABOUT HINDUISM

T.S.Rukmani

An inaugural address is always a difficult task. The first hurdle is choosing one's topic. While it was obvious that in this situation the topic has somehow to be related to what the Chair in Hindu Studies stands for, I think we all understand how difficult it is to talk about Hinduism in a meaningful way so that it strikes a sympathetic chord equally in the hearts of all sections of Hindus in a value-free manner. This is because Hindus themselves differ in their conceptions as to why they are 'Hindus'. Thus, while one group might go to a temple and participate in *pūja* and other rituals in the temple, another group might just be philosophical Hindus without adhering to any ritualistic behavior. Again, many amongst the Hindus would accept the Vedic corpus as the most authoritative of their sacred texts but it is very common to come across large numbers who are not consciously aware of these books and whose Hinduism is informed by the stories of Rāma, Kṛṣṇa, Śiva and other divinities as found in the purāṇic literature. There are also significant groups, particularly amongst the Śaiva and Śākta devotees, (these are those who consider Śiva or Śakti as their highest god/goddess) who would consider the Āgama literature as the most sacred and thus accord it a status equal to that of Vedic literature.

Unlike some other world religions, Hinduism also does not designate its Supreme God by just one name. If we leave out the philosophical Hindus who would be reluctant to give a name to the Highest Absolute, the vast majority of Hindus would believe in one Supreme God but what that god is called will differ from group to group. Thus to the Śaivas it is Śiva, to the Vaiṣṇavas it is Viṣṇu, to the worshippers of Mother Goddess she can be Śakti, Lakṣmī, Pārvatī and so on. While to a Hindu there seems to be no apparent confusion and contradiction in all these different approaches one can realize that for an outsider there is need to arrange all this in a proper perspective, for a right understanding of the religion. Thus the first lesson in Hinduism is that it has a multi-dimensional approach to spirituality.

While a manifold approach to spirituality could be equally true of many other religions as well, in the case of Hinduism there are some special reasons for this phenomenon. "Not having a human origin and going back to a period thousands of years ago, Hinduism is not a religion in the sense in which other historic religions can be thought about".¹ "Its content has altered from age to age, from community to community."² Hinduism grew along with the people who practised a way of life which they called *dharma*, and in that sense it would be more correct to call it a world view which gave paramount importance to the concept of *dharma*. *Dharma* stands for all that is fair and just and which maintains both the physical and moral order in the world. Hinduism, in this view, justifies its older name of *sanātana-dharma*. In this description of itself as a way of life, which is always in the present being eternal or *sanātana*, Hinduism seems to accept and allow for changes that are bound to occur in the course of history; it is thus willing to reinterpret old ideas and concepts in terms of new changes. It thus developed a dialectic between what is old and what is new, the two then meeting in a third dialectic of synthesizing the old with the new in a process of reconciliation. As an illustration, one can

analyze the very concept of *avatāra* or descent of God on Earth which is very much part of popular Hinduism.

While the Vedic concept of divinity reached its perfection in the Upaniṣadic monistic principle called *Brahman*, there was a reverse movement starting soon after this period, to bring that abstract principle within the realm of human understanding. Amongst the many ideas that came up as a result of this approach was the important one of *avatāra* or descent of God on earth in order to set right the balance of physical and moral order whenever there was a serious threat to it. The Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata along with the Purāṇas helped to strengthen this concept of *avatāra* through the narration of many stories centering around the popular gods. It was Viṣṇu (and to a lesser degree the other divinities) round whom were built the popular two *avatāras* like Rāma and Kṛṣṇa, but also other *avatāras* like a fish, a tortoise, a boar, a half-lion-half-man and a little dwarf (Vāmana). To include within Viṣṇu's incarnations the fish, the tortoise, the boar and the little dwarf must be a bringing together of such beliefs as were there amongst certain groups of people. But this is evident more importantly in the case of the Buddha and the Jaina *tīrthaṅkaras* who started out as the antitheses of what Hinduism held most sacred i.e. the *Vedas*. After a period of gestation Buddha and Rṣabha were accepted into the system as *avatāras* of Viṣṇu and more importantly there was the retention of the basic philosophical ideas of *karma* and reincarnation in Buddhism and Jainism, in common with Hinduism. The recent interpretation of the *avatāra* concept itself as depicting the theory of evolution, bears testimony to the continuous hermeneutic tradition in Hinduism.

If we accept Hinduism as a way of life and ask the next question as to the books/texts which are the basis of this religion we again come up with a formidable array of literature both written and oral. It goes back to the early *Vedas* and comes down to anything written in recent times, not to mention the very rich oral tradition which has been in vogue throughout history and continues to hold its sway till today. As for the contents of this vast collection, they can be classified vaguely in a chronological sequence for purposes of study, if one is careful not to take the sequencing too seriously. The ideas in these books go back to a proto-historical period and one is able to discern, if not the origin of a large number of religious and philosophical concepts, at least a profusion of practices and beliefs which must have formed the basis of the religious lives of the people.

The most sacred amongst the texts dealing with Hinduism are those called *śruti* or literature that was heard which comprises the four *Vedas*, the *Brāhmaṇas*, the Books of the Forest or *Aranyakas* and the *Upaniṣads*.³ All this is considered to be revealed literature, revealed not in the sense of revelation by God but revealed in the sense of a direct vision to sages (*ṛṣis*) who literally saw these in an inspired intuitive state and are therefore not considered to be the work of human hands. They therefore come under the rubric of 'heard texts' (*śruti*) as opposed to the later texts like the Rāmāyaṇa, the Mahābhārata, the Purāṇas, etc. which would fall under the category of 'texts from memory' (*smṛti*) or recollected texts.

The four *Vedas* contain *mantras* generally addressed to many divine personifications of natural phenomena. There are contained in this section some of the most sublime poetry and

some of you may also be interested to know that at least 27 of these early poets were women. The question of the later prohibition of Vedic learning to women is difficult to reconcile with the presence of such a large number of women poetesses. The *Brāhmaṇas* are the liturgical texts, elaborations of the actual sacrificial performances. The *Āraṇyakas* or the forest-books have a meditative approach to spirituality whereas the last of the group called the *Upaniṣads* are "the earliest efforts of man at giving a philosophic explanation of the world".⁴ They are thus invaluable in the history of human thought. This entire corpus was handed down for many hundreds of years by word of mouth from *guru* to *śiṣya* (teacher to disciple). Many technical devices were perfected to ensure that the oral transmission faithfully preserved the text and it is to the credit of these ancient *gurus* that "when the ṚgVeda was finally written down the readings of all the different manuscripts were found to have been preserved, syllable for syllable the same".⁵ Not being attributed to human authorship, as they were revealed to intuitive vision, they were venerated from the beginning as *apauruṣeya* (not composed by humans) and were the only sacred texts. All other texts would derive their sacrality by reference to Vedic conformity and true spirituality would come to mean conformance or non-conformance to the Vedic utterance. In order to be consistent to this definition of sacrality, some Indian philosophical schools like the Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya and Pūrvaśāstra would later be classified as orthodox schools, as they accepted the authority of the *Vedas* even though they did not believe in God, whereas highly spiritual schools like Buddhism and Jainism would be relegated as unorthodox because even though they were like the Pūrvaśāstra and the Vaiśeṣika in not accepting God, they were not considered orthodox, as they rejected the authority of the *Vedas*.

It is amazing to note that the contents of this Vedic corpus are so varied and rich that they seem to anticipate the different directions that religious and philosophical thought in Hinduism would take in later times. There is a pattern to the thought processes and a perception of what constitutes the essence and what can be relegated to the periphery. Thus the first of the four main patterns that emerges from Vedic literature is what is known as that of sacrifice or *yajña*. The Vedic *yajña* was a sacrifice into the fire and is an act of both internal and external purification. "The mystic fire on the sacrificial altar is a liberating force; through its agency man is freed from the impurities accumulated in the pursuit of solely selfish interests and is made capable of feeling the pulsation of the infinite in himself".⁶ Thus what is important here is the element of *tyāga* or sacrifice of oneself into the spiritual realm. The Vedic *yajña* itself may not survive in all its aspects in present-day Hinduism but it is the precursor to the domestic rites which are even today observed by a practising Hindu. Can we imagine Hinduism today without its ritual aspects like *havan* or *homa* which is performed on all important occasions in one's life? It could be the birth of a child, a marriage ceremony, moving into one's own home, reaching a comfortable age of sixty or the last event of death, all these moments are still marked by some sacrificial observance. Even today the *mantras* recited at these different ceremonies go back to the Vedic period and thus the continuity has been kept up. If we extend the imagery further we will realize that the *pūja* offering in temples falls into the same classification of sacrifice or *yajña*. The act of *tyāga* or self-surrender is more pronounced in *pūja*. The fire has been replaced by an icon and the offerings to the icon in a temple or in one's home still conveys the act of inner and outer purification.

The second pattern which can be discerned in our Vedic corpus is that of *upāsana* or meditative practices. It is in the Books of the Forest or *Āraṇyakas* that one identifies this trend towards meditation.

No more can the sacrifice take the form of a mere ritual action. Now the very being of man moved by a devout mind and absolute faith assumes the form of the sacrifice. Man himself embodies the sacrifice and offers soma, his spiritual happiness, as oblation not only to gods but to God himself. Thus the RV. 5.81.1. says that the sacrifice in which the spiritually awakened mind is harnessed attains to harmony and reaches up to God, in the harmonious synthesis of the world itself, for God is the immanent Lord of the world.⁷

This turning inward and reaching up to God in the *upāsana* mode of worship is represented in a twofold approach -one based on meditative practices and the other based on devotion to God called *bhakti*. While the more serious and psychological process of meditation would result in the Upaniṣadic speculative, philosophical inquiries and to the well known Yoga practices, the devotion to a God to whom one can relate in a personal manner caught the imagination of the land and continued to grow till it became the hallmark of popular Hinduism in the medieval period. This second type of *bhakti* could also be a combination of the Bhāgavata kind of personal devotion with the meditative Vedic *upāsana*.

In this *bhakti* mode of worship there is a God to whom one can surrender and in whom one can repose one's faith in times of distress and calamity. India has had its share of foreign invasions in plenty throughout its recorded history and one could conjecture that *bhakti* was a religious response to a political necessity. *Bhakti* which was initially a harmonious existence in God took on fatalistic tendencies particularly during the middle period when *bhakti* (devotion) was interpreted increasingly as a total dependence on God's grace for liberation, without any effort on the part of the individual seeker. This is brought out in bold relief when we compare the two schools of *bhakti* that sprang up as offshoots from Rāmānuja's school of Śrī Vaiṣṇavism in South India and in all the manifestations of *bhakti* from Rajasthan to Bengal and to the Maharashtra country during this period. *Bhakti* was a pan-Indian movement during the middle period of this century and almost everywhere it deteriorated into the passive, resigned kind of *bhakti*. Thus while individual effort is retained in the school called the monkey school or the *markaṭa nyāya* this effort is totally negated in the cat school or the *mārjāra nyāya*. The names are significant for like the little monkey clinging for support to its mother when carried from one place to another, the monkey school stresses the aspect of individual effort in the scheme of *bhakti*. On the other hand, the little kitten is passive and submits itself without any effort to its mother when carried by her. This is certainly not the Vedic idea of *upāsana* nor what Rāmānuja had in mind in his description of *bhaktiyoga*. But Rāmānuja did make provision for *prapatti* or total surrender which must have been popular at his time (11th c. CE) and which can be traced to the Bhāgavata creed; but even here it is difficult to decide whether the abject submissive, pessimistic kind of attitude was advocated.⁸ Thus the later passive, defeatist *bhakti* called *prapatti* is difficult to relate to the earlier forms of *bhakti*. One could probably find the origins of this passive *prapatti* kind of *bhakti* in the hopeless resignation of a people in a period of

despair when India was subjected to ravaging and plundering on an unprecedented scale. Be that as it may. But we find both these paradigms of *bhakti* well represented in *bhakti yoga* of later times. In the milieu of a temple culture it was *bhakti* and worship to an icon which increasingly took over as the dominant expression of Hinduism and it has never looked back after that. *Bhakti* reigns supreme as a religious motif, it finds expression in devotional music, dance, painting and in the construction of numerous temples which is now a well known phenomenon wherever Hindus have gone and settled in the world.

The other element in *upāsana* i.e. the meditative component is systematized in the collection of books called the *Upaniṣads*. The *Upaniṣads* concentrated on questions concerning the mystery of existence, the ultimate categories of thought, theories of cosmogony, theogony and other related matter. Using both reason and intuition the *Upaniṣads* arrived at the identification of the individual self called *ātman* with the universal self called *Brahman*. Positing that Reality can only be a singular entity and that was *Brahman*, it was argued that all other felt realities like the world, the empirical selves and anything else can only be less real than *Brahman*, in the ultimate sense. Thus while one can assign a relative reality to the lived world and what it stands for, it will come to an end when one realizes the ultimate Truth that is *Brahman* and which in this scheme, can only be the same as the individual selves. These *Upaniṣads* have given rise to many schools of philosophy, particularly that school of thought known as *Vedānta* which reached its logical culmination in the Advaita Vedānta of Śaṅkara in the 8th century CE. That oft quoted verse "That is perfect, this is perfect, from the perfect the perfect comes out; after taking the perfect from the perfect what remains is the perfect"⁹ embodies this philosophic truth and gets expression for the first time in quite a few of the *Upaniṣads*. Śaṅkarācārya established this truth by basing it on a solid philosophical foundation. All later commentators of *Vedānta* followed in the footsteps of Śaṅkara by commenting on the three texts which he had chosen for his exposition i.e. the *Upaniṣads*, the *Brahmasūtra* of Bādarāyana and the *Bhagavadgītā*. Śaṅkara, who is well known for his Advaita Vedānta, is traditionally also associated with re-establishing Hinduism to its proper place in the religious sphere. While traditionally again he is credited with removing the threat of Buddhism from the land, to my mind it seems that Buddhism was not much of a threat in the time of Śaṅkara -but what was more disturbing was the decadence that Hinduism as a religion had fallen into. There were more than 62 divisions or cults and *Tantra* of both kinds had its fanatic followers. Śaṅkara, with his eclectic approach, could persuade all these sectarian devotees to worship whomsoever they chose as their supreme God but as, in the ultimate sense, there was only the qualityless *Brahman* as the only Reality it did not matter in what manner or mode they worshipped their God. He must have been a charismatic leader to be able to stem the breaking up of Hinduism into many tiny cults. He brought together all the different cults under six main groups and reorganized them as *Vaiṣṇavas*, *Sāivas*, *Śāktas*, *Kaumāras*, *Skāndas* and *Gāṇapatyas*. This bold reorganization had future repercussions. Whenever a new cult sprang up, let us say like the Ayyappa cult in South India or the Santoshi Mā cult in the North, they could easily be viewed as coming under any one of the six main schools of religious worship. Śaṅkara was thus as much a systematizer of the religion of the Hindus as he was the philosopher par excellence of Advaita Vedānta. Commentaries and subcommentaries continue to be written on Śaṅkara's works. The latest attempt to relate some advaitic ideas to parallel scientific thought only underlies the

perennial appeal that *advaita* has for inquiring minds. While other systems of philosophy also developed out of the Vedic lore they did not catch the imagination of the land as that of *Vedānta*.

I have tried so far to talk about the religion and philosophy that can be traced to the Vedic corpus. But many an idea and concept also owe their origin to this ancient period of Indian history. As is well known there is an organic relationship between ideas and their development later as philosophical schools. It is a perception of unity in diversity which gave rise to many different manifestations during this time. One extension of the unity/plurality debate was to look for a symbiotic relationship of each unit in the plurality, with the ultimate unitary principle. This led to yogic methods of identifying many different principles in a micro|macro paradigm and later crystallized into the various methods of awakening the dormant macro energy called the '*kūṇḍalinī śakti*', lying latent in the six centers of the micro body.

Let us discuss two unique features of Hinduism which have now become the hallmarks of this religion, before talking about the unity|diversity manifestations in their many expressions. I am of course referring to the theory of *karma* and the reincarnation of the individual self in many births till it attains liberation. The word *karma* is used freely round the globe and is very fashionable here on the North American continent. Like the Indian curry and *mulagatani* soup it has been appropriated into alien cultures and who knows, in a few more years might even lose track of its Indian origins. Well to go back to the *karma* theory it is not until the time of the *Upaniṣads* do we get a properly conceived theory of *karma*. Initially *karma* was used strictly in a technical sense of ritual acts and sacrificial rites and formed the subject matter of the *Brāhmaṇas* and the *Srautasūtras*. At this stage, *karma* as sacrifice fulfilled a dual function of maintaining the cosmic order through some magical connection with the ritual order. So, as long as the rituals were attended to meticulously, everything was taken care of and it was proclaimed as the regulator of *dharma* which was also called *ṛta* i.e. cosmic order. Applied to the individual it grew within a metaphysical belief that this life was only a preparation for another life after death. But there is nothing special in this conception for, in a general sense, it is the common moral ground for a harmonious functioning of the universe in quite a few religions and is the basis for an ethical code of behavior amongst humans. But by the time of the *Upaniṣads*, *karma* had expanded its meaning to denote not only the sacrificial rites one may or may not do, but also the result that one obtains due to that deed. In this sense it is an extended "sphere of the mechanical law of causality" which determines the kind of life one determines for oneself in future lives. Along with the theory of *karma* in the *Upaniṣads* one also sees the presence of two other doctrines fully developed. These are the eternal nature of the self and the repeated births and deaths of the self in the world till such time as the self attains *mokṣa* or liberation. Each of these three theories i.e. the eternal nature of the self, repeated incarnations in the world and the final freedom from births and deaths depends on the other two for support and are thus necessary links in the chain of existence; thus each is a corollary to the other two. The expanded theory of *karma* was able to explain the inequalities one witnessed in the world and the pain and suffering which cannot be reconciled with the notion of an all powerful, compassionate God. Thus in the cycle of births and deaths "what we are and what circumstances we find ourselves in are dependent on what we were and what we did".¹⁰ Of course if every birth is predetermined by what went before, how and in what manner can the self attain liberation is a

big question. Further if one cannot even break the chain of *karma* the very statement of liberation being the final goal to be achieved loses its meaning. But the situation is not that hopeless. While previous tendencies can impel one to act in a certain way the intellect can use its discrimination to veer the mind away from a wrongful deed. S.Radhakrishnan uses the analogy of a card game to bring this point home. "The cards in the game of life are given to us. We do not select them. They are traced back to our past *karma*, but we can call as we please, lead what suit we will, and as we play, we gain or lose. And there is freedom".¹¹ The *Upaniṣads* thus point out that it is possible for a human being to choose the path that will lead to liberation and freedom from the chain of births and deaths. And so it is not a pure determinism that the *karma* theory posits.

In order to be able to recognize the ultimate freedom or *mokṣa*, the *Upaniṣads* proclaim that one has to lead a life of discrimination, not giving in to what is easy and pleasant.¹² There are then basically two paths in life which confront a human being; the good and the pleasant says the *Kathopaniṣad*. The wise choose the good but the weak minded fall a prey to the pleasant. And the same *Upaniṣad* declares that it is by harnessing the intellect to control the senses that one can lead a good life which is the spiritual life. "The man who has as his charioteer a discriminating intellect, and who has under his control the reins of the mind, attains the end of the road".¹³ The very same teaching is conveyed in the *Bhagavadgītā* sometimes using the same imagery.

Talking of the *Gītā* it is important to remember that during this time *karma* also acquired a new dimension of meaning both literally and philosophically called *karma-yoga* or 'the path of *karma* as a means to liberation'. Attempting a synthesis of the old and the new the *Gītā* retained the old *karma* as ritual without losing its Vedic meaning, but embellished it with its newer nuances of all deeds. Set in the context of a battle and preaching a doctrine of liberation, *karmayoga* in the *Bhagavadgītā* was designed to serve the same purpose as *jñānayoga* (the path of knowledge) or *bhaktiyoga* (the path of devotion). In a wider sense even the act of knowledge is an action and so is the act of devotion. If any action can transcend its boundaries of bondage it has to be done in a spirit of detachment. In such an interpretation, if knowledge and devotion can be paths to liberation so can "action" itself be a path if it is done in a disinterested manner.¹⁴

If we now turn our attention to society and the individual's role in it we find that the Vedic fourfold pattern which we discussed above was sought to be realized in the concept of the four *āśramas* or stages of life of an individual which were described as that of a student, a householder, a forest-dweller and a renunciate respectively. These four stages were also conceived as having an organic relationship with the four patterns. Thus the *brahmacarya āśrama* and the *grhasthāśrama* which denote the stages of life as a student and a householder, fit into the *mantra* section and ritualistic explanations found in the *Vedas* and the *Brāhmaṇas*; while the *Āraṇyakas* (forest-books) and the *Upaniṣads* seem to address those who have realized the futility of mundane existence and who have retired into the forests to meditate on higher truths. Thus these books were meant for those belonging to the *Vānaprastha* and *Sannyāsa* stages of life.

Along with the four stages or *āśramas* we have a parallel development of the Vedic scheme of individual goals called the *puruṣārthas* which can be viewed as a hierarchy of values. The four values themselves would be stated as *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*. *Dharma* was the umbrella under which both *artha* and *kāma* would reside and would also be regulated by. Derived from the root *dhṛ* meaning to uphold, to sustain, to support, etc.; it meant a certain value oriented behavior, a behavior which behoves a human being. It is during the *brahmacarya* and *grhastha* stages or students' and householders' lives that one learnt about *dharma* and also practised the first three values of *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma*. *Artha* is acquisition of material wealth by dhārmic means and *kāma* is the fulfillment of legitimate sensual pleasures by dhārmic means. There was a constant effort to present characters both men and women who were the ideals in the conduct of *dharma* and who were thus held up as role models for humans to emulate. Rāma of Rāmāyana fame was such a character drawn vividly by Vālmikī. The example of Rāma and of characters like Yudhiṣṭhira, Nala and Haris'candra in the Mahābhārata, as also women like Sītā, Damayantī, Draupadī and others were depicted by these epic authors to serve as everyday examples in keeping with the dhārmic concept of conduct. It is good to remind ourselves here that there is no "dharma concept" which is static and normative. The long history of hermeneutics in Indian thought has taken care to see that there is no stultification or stagnation of growth in the ideas themselves. Thus we saw how ideas like *karma* and rebirth changed and got enriched as time went by. This was as true in the plane of ideas as in the interpretation of rules in society. Whenever societal conditions called for new adjustments a lawmaker normally called a Dharmasūtra author would come up with alternate meanings and interpretations. Thus we find different approaches to the inheritance laws concerning women in Āpastamba, Gautama, Yājñavalkya and Śaṅkha-Likhita.¹⁵ And with the strides that women have made in recent times I am sure if a Dharmasūtra were to be written today, it would make provision for such women but of course within the overriding rule of "behavior that behoves a human being".

When one examines these goals of human value and the four stages of human life worked out by the early social scientists in India, there comes into focus some overriding concerns for the welfare of both the individual and the well being of society as a whole. First and foremost is the balanced outlook which allows enough scope for normal aspirations of the fulfillment of basic impulses but which also takes care to insist that even day to day activities are enclosed within a moral code of *dharma*. Secondly there was implicit in this formulation, an affirmation of the good life here on earth and it therefore discounts the oft-quoted statement that Hindus are other-worldly and do not care for matters that are worldly.

Let us ponder for a moment on that common perception of Hinduism, i.e. that it is "other-worldly". The last value to be pursued by an individual, as pointed out, is called *mokṣa* or liberation from this cycle of births and deaths. When this last value is combined with the first three of *dharma*, *artha* and *kāma* it certainly devalues the world in relation to the ultimate freedom to be achieved. But by positing it as the last goal and also by assigning the life of a forest-dweller (*vānaprastha*) and renouncer of the world (*sannyāsin*) to the third and the fourth in the stages of life, there is the acknowledgment of a hierarchy of competence in an individual to be able to come to the fourth stage after experiencing the other states in the lived world. And

by also enclosing the values within the two limits of *dharma* and *mokṣa* there is running through all the values and stages of life an undercurrent of spirituality which can be viewed as closer to a sense of "worldlessness"¹⁶ or to describe it differently it is the consciousness of something more than what the world stands for; in the very act of living in the world "the spirit remains transcendent".¹⁷ And so there is the constant refrain of maintenance of detachment even in the midst of attachment as the *Īśopaniṣad* says: "Knowing that whatever there is in the world is pervaded by *Īśa*, experience the world through detachment; do not hanker after another's wealth".¹⁸ Gandhiji was so fond of this verse that he maintained that even if all the sacred texts of Hinduism were to be destroyed and if this one verse from the *Īśopaniṣad* survived Hinduism would live. A spirit of detachment assumes the relativity of the world and thus underscores the insignificance of the individual in a cosmic context. While every individual is conscious of the present life what went before and what will come to be are big enigmas. It is said that "Life is an isthmus between two eternities." The *Gītā* also expresses the same thought as 'Unclear are the beginnings of living beings, unclear again are their end; it is only the in-between lives that are known, so why should one mourn for that'.¹⁹ Such statements which abound in the Hindu tradition constantly remind one of the limitedness of the individual and the relativity of the world in the ultimate sense.

A relativistic approach will find it easier to valorize virtues like tolerance and non-violence because such an approach enables one to instinctively intuit the interrelatedness of the whole universe. It is this background in which Gandhi grew up that made it possible for him to use both non-violence and tolerance as effective means even for a political end. According to Arnold Toynbee "the triumph of non-violent cooperation has been a joint triumph of Gandhi's spirit and the Indian peoples' spirit".²⁰ And this triumph of the people was witnessed when the general public in unprecedented numbers joined Gandhi's movement of *satyāgraha*, as he called his principle of non-violent, truthful struggle for independence. This was because the public or the common men and women in the street did not find these values alien to their culture as they were rooted in *dharma*.

If I were to be asked at this point which single Vedic concept appeals to me the most, not in an emotional sense, but because it has contributed in shaping the Hindu character to a large extent, I would unhesitatingly say it is the concept of viewing Reality as One and allowing its manifestations to be manifold: *ekam sat viprā bahudhā vadanti* says the *ṚgVeda*.²¹ Realizing that the Ultimate is One or *eka* was indeed the acme of spiritual thought. This concept of unity in diversity emerged in the midst of the belief in the many manifestations of divine powers. While philosophically this One idea would later give rise to many different schools of thought, in the everyday world this unity|diversity paradigm developed in different schools within their own respective logic of understanding and interpretation, to make it relevant to themselves. Nothing illustrates this unity|diversity principle and the interrelatedness of things more than the approach to any artistic venture in the Sanskrit tradition. Let us take the art of sculpture in India which, as you all might know, reached its perfection in what are known as the Chola bronzes "those exquisite pieces of bronze iconography, carved out of an alloy of five metals -copper, brass, lead, with a little bit of gold and silver". The story goes that a king called Vajra, being a great devotee of *Śiva*, wanted to make his own image of *Śiva*. He therefore approached the

sage Mārkaṇḍeya for instruction. But instead of teaching him iconography Mārkaṇḍeya asked Vajra whether he knew how to paint. Vajra then said he was willing to learn painting in order to be able to sculpt; but Mārkaṇḍeya said that -in order to know how to paint he had first to learn how to dance; and then to know dancing he was told to learn instrumental and vocal music and so the story goes on.²² The point of the interconnectedness of things as well as the unity|diversity layers of meaning are portrayed vividly in this anecdote. What is true of the art of sculpture is equally true in the other arts as well. It is well illustrated in the very design of a temple for instance. One starts at the outer courtyard of the temple on whose walls a profusion of worldly motifs are etched, which in no way takes away from the sacrality of the temple as an abode of the essence of spirituality. Since life is a totality, all legitimate activity belongs to the day to day life and can thus find a place in temple art. But as one traverses the distance from the outer to the inner sanctum sanctorum all this is given up and one stands before that spiritual Essence which can be represented in many ways from that of one's preferred deity to one of complete empty space.

This embracing of the whole as a unity is also at the foundation of the concept of the five debts or *ṛnas* that the Hindu had to discharge in the course of one's life. These five *ṛnas* or debts are called the *brahma-ṛna*, the *deva-ṛna*, the *pitṛ-ṛna*, the *manuṣya-ṛna* and the *bhūta-ṛna* respectively. Brahma stands for learning and scholarship and the Hindu is reminded to continue the tradition of learning and add to the advancement of knowledge. The second debt is what one owes to the unknown elements -an indirect acknowledgment of the limitations of the human being brought into sharp focus during natural calamities, personal sickness and pain. The third is the debt to one's ancestors which is again a tribute to those who have gone before us. No one is born into a vacuum; one inherits many inputs from the family one is born into i.e. from the ancestors and in many ways is also conditioned by the family. The fourth debt to our fellow beings called *manuṣya-ṛna* insists on sharing what one has with others and has survived in the traditional hospitality of the Hindu. The last debt is an ecological vision, an acknowledgment of the universe being an interconnected phenomenon; since the word *bhūta* comes from the root *bhū* 'to be' it encompasses anything that exists and thus this debt is an awareness of the interdependence of everything in the universe. Is it not appropriate then with such a background and approach to life, it was left to J.C. Bose, an Indian scientist, to discover the presence of life in the non-living as much as in the living? Addressing the Royal Institution in London in 1901 Bose said

I have shown you this evening autographic records of the history of stress and strain in the living and non-living. How similar are the writings. So similar indeed that you cannot tell one apart from another. Among such phenomena, how can one draw a line of demarcation and say, here the physical ends, and there the physiological begins? Such absolute barriers do not exist.²³

Bose goes on in that lecture to acknowledge how he understood through his researches, "a little of that message proclaimed by my ancestors on the banks of the Ganges thirty centuries ago" about the One Eternal Truth.²⁴ Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird quote Professor John Arthur Thompson's comments in their book *The Secret Life of Plants* regarding Bose's

discovery:

It is in accordance with the genius of India that the investigator should press further towards unity than we have yet hinted at, should seek to correlate responses and memory expressions in the living with their analogous inorganic matter, and should see in anticipation lines of physics and physiology and psychology converging and meeting.²⁵

So did the London Times write "While we in England were still steeped in the rude empiricism of barbaric life, the subtle Easterner had swept the universe into a synthesis and had seen the one in all its changing manifestations".²⁶

The importance of the unity concept exemplified in the *Vedas* cannot be overemphasized. The approach in this talk should in no way be interpreted as an anachronistic one. An attempt has been made to point out the connections of later Hinduism to Vedic roots, wherever it is possible; but it, by no means, suggests that all thoughts and ideas belong exclusively to this period alone. In its long history Hinduism has shown a vigorous growth and developed many new paradigms but it always acknowledged its continuity to the Vedic corpus. The unity concept is such a one and it continues to hold sway to the present day. This can be visualized as a constant reference point in the transcendent spirit which has to be realized within oneself, one day. If one can view that as the center of a circle all the other expressions of existence in the world will fit into that of the circumference of the circle. A circle has no beginning nor an end - any point in the circumference is both a beginning and an end but can only be known to exist with reference to the center. The circumference defines itself as a circumference only in the context of the centre of a circle and the Hindu never forgot this at least in the spiritual sense. The enactment of the drama of life took place in the area between the circumference and the centre. "The still centre was the unity consciousness, formless, tranquil, beyond all conceptions of the mind"²⁷ whereas the area in between contained all activity.

It is this centre which has engaged the attention of the *sannyāsī*, the philosopher, the medical practitioner, the artist, the religious seeker and the *yogīs* and *siddhas* in India throughout the ages. The paths they have evolved have been divergent but they are all different ways to reach the same goal; the vital point "to which one has to return after journeying in the periphery of the circumference".²⁸

* * * *

ENDNOTES

¹Rukmani, T.S. *Hinduism -A Paradigm of the Centre and the Circumference*, p. 8.

²Radhakrishnan, S. *The Hindu View of Life*, p. 11.

³There is a parallel collection of sacred works called the *Āgamas* which are accorded equal sanctity by their followers though they may not be as ancient as the Vedic literature under discussion.

⁴Hiriyanna, M. *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, p. 52.

⁵O'Flaherty, Wendy Doniger, *Textual Sources for the Study of Hinduism*, p. 1.

⁶Sivaraman, K. (Ed.) *Hindu Spirituality*, p. 30.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁸The conditions for *prapatti* are indeed very stringent. First there has to be the "resolve to be in conformity to God's will" and also "the rejection of all that is contrary to the Divine purpose" and complete faith in God. cf. *Hindu Spirituality*, p. 271.

⁹*Pūrnamadah Pūrnamidam Pūrñāt Pūrnamudacyate, Pūrñasya pūrñamādāya Pūrñamevāvasīsyate. Brhadāranyakopaniṣad. 5.1.1*

¹⁰Mahadevan, T.M.P. *Outlines of Hinduism*, p. 59.

¹¹cf. *Hindu View of Life*, p. 75.

¹²*śreyaśca preyaśca manusyametaḥ, tau saṃparītya vivinakti dhīraḥ, śreyoḥi dhiro 'bhi preyaśo vṛñte, preyo mando yogaksemādvṛñte. Kathopaniṣad 1.2.2.*

¹³*viññānasārathiryastu manah pragrahavānnarah so 'dhvvanah paramāpnoti tadviśnoḥ paramam padam. Kathopaniṣad 1.3.9.*

¹⁴*Bhagavadgītā* II.47.

¹⁵Kane, P.V. *The History of Dharmasāstra*, Vol.I, Part I. pp. 22-ff.

¹⁶cf. *Hindu Spirituality*, Introduction.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Isāvāsyamidam sarvam yatkinca jagatyām jagat tena tyaktena bhuñjītaḥ mā grāṇaḥ kasyasvit dhanam.*

¹⁹*avyaktāni bhūtāni vyaktamadyāni bhārata. avyaktanidhanānyeva tatra kā paridevanā. Gītā, II.28*

²⁰Toynbee, Arnold. *One World and India*, p. 54.

²¹*RgVeda*, I.164.46.

²²cf. *Hinduism -A Paradigm of the Centre and the Circumference*, p. 9.

²³Swami Ranganathananda. *Education for Human Excellence*, Vol.III, p. 149.

²⁴*Ibid.*, p. 150.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 403.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷cf. *Hinduism -A Paradigm of the Centre and the Circumference*, p. 10.

²⁸*Ibid.*, p. 9.

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